

KEY PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Human Dignity

Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. Human life is sacred, and the dignity of the human person is the starting point for a moral vision for society.

The principle of human dignity is grounded in the idea that the person is made in the image of God. The person is the clearest reflection of God among us. We are required to honor the human person, to give priority to the person.

Community and the Common Good

In a culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider society.

How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the good of the whole society, to the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

Human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency -- starting with food, shelter and clothing, employment, health care, and education. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities -- to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

A basic moral test of society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation.

The option for the poor is a perspective that examines personal decisions, policies of private and public institutions, and economic relationships in terms of their effects on the poor -- those who lack the minimum necessities of nutrition, housing, education, and health care. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all.

The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self.

The option for the poor is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good. A healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society.

Participation

All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community.

It is wrong for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate in society. In the words of the U.S. bishops, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race. To treat people this way is effectively to say they simply do not count as human beings."

Dignity of Work/Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, and to safe working conditions. They also have a fundamental right to organize and join unions.

People have a right to economic initiative and private property, but these rights have limits. No one is allowed to amass excessive wealth when others lack the basic necessities of life.

Stewardship of Creation

Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. The goods of the earth are gifts from God, intended for the benefit of all. We humans are not the ultimate owners of these goods, but rather, the temporary stewards. We are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for these gifts and preserving them for future generations.

Global Solidarity

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Solidarity means that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

John Paul II has called solidarity a virtue. It is the virtue, he says, by which we demonstrate "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good ... because we are all really responsible for all."

Constructive Role for Government

Because we are social beings, the state is natural to the person. Therefore, the state has a positive moral function. It is an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good.

One of the key functions of government is to assist citizens in fulfilling their responsibility to others in society. Since, in a large and complex society these responsibilities cannot adequately be carried out on a one-to-one basis, citizens need the help of government in fulfilling these responsibilities and promoting the common good.

According to the principle of subsidiarity, the functions of government should be performed at the lowest level possible, as long as they can be performed adequately. If they cannot, then a higher level of government should intervene to provide help.

Promotion of Peace

Catholic teaching promotes peace as a positive, action-oriented concept. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements."

There is a close relationship in Catholic teaching between peace and justice. Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among human beings.